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ABSTRACT

Incorporation of management principles in the classroom can motivate students to successfully complete project work. The Communication Arts Department at Georgia Southern University developed a Public Relations Event Management course in which the students were responsible for planning a campus-wide special event to raise funds for two clients. Five methods were used to measure the effectiveness of the course: comparison of student-established event objectives to actual results; student evaluations; participant evaluations; peer evaluations; and a focus group interview among the students in the class. Results indicated that combining the primary management functions (planning and decision making, organizing, leading and controlling) and the R-A-C-E formula (research, action planning, communication and evaluation) can increase the application of critical thinking skills in the classroom. Further, authentic assessment and management by objectives can provide educators with techniques to measure the success of the project work. (Contains nine references and one table of data). (Author/RS)

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Management by Objectives: Authentic Assessment in a Public Relations Practicum

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Abstract

Incorporation of management principles in the classroom can motivate students to successfully complete project work. Combining the primary management functions (planning and decision making, organizing, leading and controlling) and the R-A-C-E formula (research, action planning, communication and evaluation) can increase the application of critical thinking skills in the classroom. Further, authentic assessment and management by objectives can provide educators with techniques to measure the success of the project work.

Management by Objectives: Authentic Assessment in a Public Relations Practicum

Educators are constantly searching for fresh, new ways to encourage students enrolled in undergraduate public relations programs to take the theories and principles they've learned from lectures and textbooks and apply them to "real world" situations. So case study analyses, what if situations, even actual client work is incorporated into the curriculum. But these activities alone can't provide students with the necessary exercises to strengthen their critical thinking, strategic planning, decision making and analytical skills.

The Public Relations Society of America's Official Statement on Public Relations defines public relations as a management function. This statement further defines some of the important tasks public relations encompasses, ranging from anticipating, analyzing, and interpreting public opinion and issues; counseling management at all levels; researching, conducting, and evaluating programs of action and communication; to planning and implementing an organization's efforts to influence change; setting goals and objectives; and planning, budgeting, training staff and managing resources (Wilcox & Agee 7). So it seems only natural that these management concepts should be incorporated into undergraduate public relations course curricula. However, rather than just implementing the primary management functions (planning and decision making, organizing, leading, controlling) or the R-A-C-E formula (research, action planning, communication, and evaluation), a holistic approach is taken. Principles and tasks illustrated in this research

range from the traditional strategic program planning procedures to more specific event management issues such as vendor relations, committee coordination, set up and catering, decorating, zero-based budgeting and deadline scheduling.

Over the years, the roles of public relations technicians and managers have emerged. While the communication manager conceptualizes and directs public relations programs, the communication technician carries out technical services such as writing, editing, photographing, and producing publications (Gruning 18). Undergraduate public relations education should attempt to strike a balance between teaching skills that will benefit the future technician *and* the manager.

Teaching public relations in the traditional communications context or converting it into a business school-based framework has been an issue for several decades. The Spring 1989 issue of *Public Relations Review* devoted its contents to the discussion of public relations education. In this issue, a descriptive research study conducted by Van Slyke Turk (38) examined the perceptions and opinions of public relations practitioners regarding how important they thought various managerial skills and orientation are for the success of organizations and of the specialists who work in those organizations. Oral communication, written communication, and planning and organizing ranked, respectively, as the top three categories regarding general leadership skills. When asked to rank-order the importance of specific management skills being taught in a public relations curriculum, planning and organizing, problem solving and decision making, goal setting and

prioritizing, and time management ranked, respectively, as the top four categories. Turk's research reinforces the need to incorporate analytical, budgeting, planning and problem solving skills in public relations courses.

In the same issue of *Public Relations Review* David Ferguson, Betsy Anne Plank and Pat Jackson participated in a question and answer interview conducted by Jim VanLeuven which focused on the state of Public Relations education. When asked what, if any, management skills should be taught within the public relations curriculum and which should be taught in business school classes, Plank stated that writing for public relations should be thought of as a business and management skill because it involves research, analysis, getting ideas on paper and being sensitive to audiences (7). She added that novice practitioners should also be familiar with budgets and the ability to manage people. Jackson said students need to acquire three kinds of management orientations: finance, management theory and organizational behavior (7). Ferguson said he would not expect undergraduates majoring in public relations to have more than a small amount of management skills, particularly if they are focusing on media relations and creative skills (7). However, he said that was not true for those students who wish become consultants.

In the Spring 1994 issue of *Public Relations Review*, Kinnick and Cameron's research, which was conducted among 59 U.S. colleges and universities offering public relations sequences, postulated that management topics are only given cursory treatment in most public relations programs. The study lead to three general recommendations: 1) PR Management needs to be taught to undergraduates 2) PR management courses need to emphasize specific management techniques and

skills and 3) instructors need to make clear to students the consequences of failing to develop management skills (83).

The articles cited above signify that a well-rounded public relations management course must provide students with opportunities to practice strategic decision-making as well as the more technical managerial skills. "The best analytical and decision-making skills are of little practical value without a nuts-and-bolts knowledge of basic techniques for accounting, budgeting, scheduling, and monitoring program implementation," said Kinnick and Cameron (83).

METHODOLOGY

During the winter 1996 term the Communication Arts Department at Georgia Southern University (GSU) decided to experiment with teaching methods during a newly designed class, **PR Event Management**. The course evolved as a result of research conducted by three of the department's faculty members. These colleagues conducted a content analysis by examining student internship mid-term reports to find out the kinds of projects students were responsible for completing during their internships. Event management ranked second among a list of 47 tasks. Event set-up ranked 15th.

Thus, PR Event Management was designed in order to respond to a need in the Public Relations curriculum. Twenty-three students enrolled in the class. But the pedagogy was handled in a different manner than the traditional lecture and test-taking format. Therefore, the procedure was somewhat experimental in nature. The students were responsible for planning a

campus-wide special event in order to raise funds for two clients, the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) - GSU Chapter and the Communication Arts Department. The event, "Leap of Fate," was similar to bachelor and bachelorette bids conducted throughout the 1980s. The students' assignment was to incorporate management principles into the well-known public relations strategic planning process (research, action planning, communication and evaluation) while coordinating the special event via their class.

A new kind of evaluation technique, authentic assessment, is evolving on campuses across the country (Hunt). This tool examines student performance based on worthy intellectual tasks and measures how well students successfully complete "real world" projects being assigned in the classroom. In some cases, like the PR Event Management courses, students become employees and the classroom is transformed into an office setting. However, instead of just being evaluated by their instructor, the students are also evaluated by external audiences such as their peers, clients and practitioners in the specified field.

Methods for evaluating the PR Event Management class combined authentic assessment with traditional evaluation tools. Five methods were used to measure the effectiveness of the class's successfulness, including: 1)event objectives established by the students in relation to the actual results, termed "Management by Objectives"; 2) evaluations and follow-up reports submitted by the students who enrolled in the PR Event Management course; 3)evaluations submitted by the participants who attended the special event conducted by the students; 4) peer evaluations submitted by the Southeast

District executive board members of Public Relations Student Society of America during a regional competition; and 5) a focus group interview among the students in the class.

Before the students could develop event objectives, they conducted pre-campaign research to determine the specifics of the event, including a background and situational analysis, statement of problem/opportunity, and identification of key target audiences. All of this information was included in the event proposal which was reviewed and approved by the Judicial Board and Academic Administration at Georgia Southern University. They then moved into the planning aspect of the event, which included establishing goals and objectives, strategies, tactics and determining key publics. The objectives included determining attendance, revenue and expenses, and media coverage.

Second, the students enrolled in the PR Event Management class were responsible for evaluating the class at the end of the term like they do every quarter. Areas of evaluation included specific techniques practiced by the instructor as well as the overall content and format of the class. In addition to filling in the standardized form, students had an opportunity to make arbitrary comments. Many of these comments are included in the data. Additionally, many students made comments in their transmittal letters which were included in their updated event reports. After these reports were assigned a grade, they were given to the client, PRSSA, so the data can be used in the future.

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Third, the students designed evaluations which were distributed among event participants. These evaluations included a five-point scale to critique various facets of the event, ranging from the diversity of date packages to decorations of the ballroom and professionalism of the event coordinators.

Fourth, GSU's PRSSA Chapter submitted the "Leap of Fate" proposal for regional competition among 25 other PRSSA chapters throughout the Southeast District. The chapter won first place for *Most Outstanding Special Event/Program* at the 1996 PRSSA Southeast District Conference in Atlanta. Judging criteria included implementation of various public relations strategies, principles, and tactics; utilization of volunteers; creativity; organization; and overall design of the program.

Finally, a focus group interview was conducted. Seven students from the PR Event Management class participated in the interview. Questions focused specifically on the format and structure of how the class was conducted as opposed to how the event was designed. (Note: Upon termination of the event, the students were responsible for writing an in-depth follow-up report which was submitted to PRSSA so the organization could determine what needed to be done to refine the event.)

FINDINGS

The success of the **objectives**, mostly quantitative in nature, was easy to determine. Students projected a crowd of 500 attendees; 325 attended the event. However, approximately 400 tickets were sold. Therefore, when calculating in the 75 "no shows," the event fell short by only 20%

(100 people) of its projected numbers. Media placement also was successful. The students earned feature story coverage in all of the newspapers which received their press release, including the community paper and both campus papers. They received television coverage on the ABC affiliate and were represented on three different occasions on a campus radio station talk show.

As for the budget, students broke down their figures into two categories: revenue and expenses. These calculations were realistic in nature. In reference to the revenue, the students raised $53 over their projections. Regarding expenses, they spent $2.77 more than they had budgeted. The students were pleased to report that they netted $1721 ($51 more than they had anticipated) on a zero-based budget with no working capital to get them started.

The second method, **student evaluations and follow-up reports,** unveiled many reoccurring themes. First, students believed the overall employer/employee and employee/client relationship and office setting of the class worked well. They also liked being put into committees and knowing they would be held accountable for all the duties pertaining to their specific committee areas.

Another finding indicated that the students liked having to turn in weekly progress reports which were disseminated among the other committees. They cited two reasons: First, they respected the fact that they had to be held accountable each and every week for tasks they were responsible for completing. Second, sharing what they were doing via these reports enhanced

the communication among the 23 students. This mechanism also curtailed the overlapping of projects and aided in the overall continuity of the group.

Finally, the students repeatedly expressed how much they enjoyed being able to *apply* management principles they learned in their introductory public relations courses, they had read about in case studies, and they had incorporated into the design of their campaigns in other classes. Many referred to these elements as "real world" principles, strategies, and tactics. These components included creating budgets; establishing project timelines and deadlines; and developing business relationships with vendors, administrators, and the media.

Participant evaluations represented the third method. Eighty participants filled out the forms. The comments from the evaluations indicated that the students liked the mystery date extravaganza and the silent auction activities the most. The top suggestions included more music, more silent auction items, and less time having the bachelors and bachelorettes on stage. Participants were also asked to critique five facets of the event via a 5-point scale (1=poor and 5=excellent). These elements included the silent auction, the mystery date extravaganza, the professionalism of the staff and volunteers, overall organization of the event, and equal student body representation of mystery date participants. See table below on next page.

Event Elements	Mean Score
Silent Auction	4.43
Mystery Date Extravaganza	4.67
Professionalism of Staff	4.75
Overall Organization of Event	4.66
Equal Representation of Student Body	4.26

The fourth method entailed **peer evaluations** by PRSSA's Southeast District executive board members. Winning the competition indicated that the event was worthy of commendation. This peer judging exposed students to yet another "real world" evaluation technique. Further, the judges served as another set of outside critics who objectively focused on pointing out the *positive* points of the project. Their points-of-view offered another evaluation perspective because they were judging the event based only on the written materials and print collaterals submitted for the competition as opposed to the peer evaluators who actually attended the event and placed more emphasis on performance.

The fifth method used to measure the effectiveness of applying management principles in the classroom was a **focus group interview**. The seven students who participated offered valuable constructive criticism regarding the structure and format of the class. Four questions were asked:

1. What worked effectively regarding the organizational structure and format of the class? Why?
2. What didn't work effectively? Why?
3. What motivated you to succeed?
4. What public relations management principles were evident during the planning of your special event?

Question #1 revealed an array of answers. Overall, the students reported that they liked the design of the employer/employee and employee/client relationships that were immediately established, the requirement of weekly individual and committee progress reports, the implementation of crisis planning "what if" exercises, the focus on the actual planning and event results versus textbook test-taking exercises, the opportunity to engage in hands-on management activities, and the democracy of the group's culture which allowed everyone in the class to have a say in the various aspects of the event planning procedures.

Question #2 uncovered some problems that occurred during the planning of the event. One issue the students addressed is that they wished they had been more involved in the development of the initial event proposal which was reviewed by the university's Judicial Board. Unfortunately, due to time constraints because the class only had 10 weeks to plan, implement, and evaluate the event, this was not possible. However, the students said they were glad they were able to offer information that was included in the revised proposal, which was approved by the Judicial Board.

Another issue many of the students commented on both during the focus group and in their class evaluations was that there were too many people with "strong" personalities in the class who tried to take over the entire event. One student stated: "There were too many leaders and not enough followers." Others said the size of the class caused chaos; they preferred 18-20 to the 23 enrolled in the class.

Some students complained that deadlines weren't met. However, they then quickly pointed out that this was a "real world" problem and that the "slackers" helped them develop ways to handle these situations when they arise. A final issue the students discussed revolved around the time and day the class was offered. They agreed that only meeting on Mondays and Wednesdays created a gap because the students didn't collectively meet again for five days. This window between Wednesday and Monday could have potentially caused communication and planning problems. However, the students said they curtailed the problem by proactively communicating with each other and the instructor via the telephone and during separate mini-planning meetings.

Question #3 uncovered some very interesting findings. In most classes, the predominate motivator is the end-of-term student grade. According to this focus group, that was not the case in the PR Event Management class. Students reported six different reasons why they were motivated. First, they explained that the success of the event and its end result was the most important motivating factor. Second, they all agreed that being able to achieve industry experience in a classroom setting was a definite motivator. Additionally, the students discussed how being responsible for an entire campus-wide fundraiser motivated them to succeed because their reputation was at stake among their peers, professors and administrators throughout the university. In fact, the fourth point they made was that the initial challenge from the Administration (i.e., having these superiors tell them they couldn't host the event for "political reasons") challenged them to want to do it even more -- and to produce an even more successful event. "We just didn't

want to quit. So we set certain standards and we set them high," one student commented.

Other students said they liked the closeness they established during this class due to the nature of its structure. They were able to develop close-knit friendships with other students in the class. They reported that this closeness isn't usually established in a traditional lecture and test-taking class. It should also be noted that of the 23 students enrolled in this course, 11 students, nearly half of the class, had perfect attendance. Another 6 only missed one class and the remaining 6 missed only two classes over a 10-week period. Other than a statement that said students were allowed to take up to four absences, there were no penalties or stipulations regarding the attendance policy indicated in the syllabus. Increased attendance supports the premise that students were highly motivated to participate in the class assignment.

Finally, answers from this interview divulged that the students were motivated by the management principles themselves. Specifically, students said they were motivated because they realized that through the successful coordination of this event, they were actually acquiring these critical management principles which included strategic planning, networking, total quality management, empowerment, synergy, and leadership. All 23 students commented, whether it be during the focus group interview, in their evaluations or in their follow-up reports, that the hands-on, "real world" management experience was integral to motivating them to learn and to succeed in this class.

ANALYSIS

The data has revealed three outcomes. First, this research demonstrated that motivational factors, which are a key part of the *leading* management function, played a prevalent role in encouraging students to apply public relations theories, principles, strategies and tactics. Therefore, their critical thinking skills were enhanced.

The term "motivation" originates from the Latin word *movere*, which means "to move." The basic motivation model incorporates the concepts of needs, drives, goals and rewards. There are two schools of motivational theories: content and process. Content theories focus on *what* energizes, arouses, or starts behavior whereas the process theories focus on *why* people are motivated (Szilagyi & Wallace 89). Results from the data discussed above clearly indicates that the students enrolled in the PR Event Management class were motivated by two factors: 1) the end result -- or the goal -- which is the same motivator postulated by process theories 2) and the opportunity to utilize "real world" management principles. The students in this class demonstrated that they were motivated by these two elements rather than by earning good grades, a traditional student motivator.

Edwin Locke's goal theory, which describes the relationship between conscious goals and task performance, postulates that an employee's conscious goals influence his or her work behavior. Further, individual motivation and performance are improved if the employee knows clearly, and is challenged by, what needs to be done (Szilagyi & Wallace 142). This was apparent in the PR Event Management class. The students agreed that producing a successful event

was far more important than earning an "A" or having "comp time" awarded to them time at the end of the quarter to compensate for the hours they put in to the project outside of the classroom.

Second, authentic assessment stimulated students to do well and produce a quality program. Knowing they were being critiqued not only by their instructor but also by their peers, other professors and campus administrators inspired them to do the best they could and to produce the finest event of which they were capable.

Finally, it was evident that the management principles themselves motivated students to learn -- and to produce a successful event. The most prevalent management concepts cited by the students were strategic planning, networking, total quality management, empowerment, synergy, and leadership.

CONCLUSION

Combining basic management principles with public relations communication management principles in a project-based public relations course can enhance students' levels of motivation and, in turn, may increase the productivity and quality of their work. Additionally, by encouraging students to utilize these management principles, students demonstrate higher order critical thinking skills which will serve them well upon graduation, regardless of the career they pursue.

Public relations practitioners and educators continue to boast that public relations is a *management function*. Therefore, colleges and universities must continue their search to find resourceful and creative ways to incorporate management principles into the public relations curriculum. As the millennium approaches, managing information will become increasingly more technological for tomorrow's public relations practitioner. It is up to educators to work collaboratively with industry professionals to provide students with the essential tools to become effective managers.

This study represents only one instance of academic assessment via project work. The area of authentic assessment research in higher education -- especially in public relations -- is virtually untapped. As with any study, repetition can help to validate or disprove its results. Future studies on project-based classes will allow for more refining and restructuring. Fine-tuning these management classes provides a win-win situation for everyone: the instructors matriculate students who possess the necessary tools to succeed; students enter the workforce with communication as well as technician management skills; and the industry continues to flourish with proactive PR professionals who are able to serve the organizations they represent.

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